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ABSTRACT

This ERIC digest synthesizes research findings relating active learning to student achievement, reviews the status of active learning practices in today's social studies classrooms, presents examples of active learning practices in specific areas of the social studies, and provides a list of suggestions and resources for integrating active learning in the social studies classroom. The first section highlights the growing body of research relating active learning approaches to student achievement, not only among young children but also among secondary and postsecondary students. The second section emphasizes the gap between theory and practice by highlighting recent educational reports suggesting the need for a more varied, more active approach to teaching social studies. In the third section, active learning approaches currently being used in the social studies are listed, including mock trials, case study analyses, student participation in opinion polls and surveys, and participation in community-based education. Seven specific recommendations for incorporating active learning into the social studies curriculum are outlined in the fourth section. The publication concludes with a list of ten related resources. (LH)

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ACTIVE LEARNING

The terms "active learning" and "experiential learning" appear to be used interchangeably throughout educational literature, sometimes synonymously, sometimes connoting different meanings. For example, "experiential learning" is sometimes used in reference only to nonclassroom or off-campus learning experiences. At other times, the term can be found to describe any action-oriented, "hands-on" approach to learning, in or out of the classroom. The important thing is the concept, whatever label we give it. For purposes of this paper, the broader term "active learning" will be used to encompass a variety of active learning concepts and practices, e.g., experiential education, "hands on" learning, inquiry or discovery learning, community-based education, and those classroom techniques involving active participation by students.

This ERIC Digest will examine positive research findings relating active learning to student achievement, review the status of active learning in today's social studies classrooms, present examples of active learning practices in specific areas of the social studies, and provide a list of suggestions and resources for integrating active learning into the social studies classroom.

What are some positive research findings that relate active learning to student achievement?

Good teachers have always instinctively known that many students seemed happiest and even seemed to learn best through "doing." As early as 1931, a well-known educational report (The Hadow Report) proposed that "the curriculum is to be thought of in terms of activity and experience rather than knowledge to be acquired or facts to be stored" (Massey 1981, p. 32). John Dewey, too, warned that it was the educator's responsibility to see that learning grew out of the conditions of experience that arouse in the learner an active quest for information and for production of new ideas.

Numerous other lines of inquiry have shed a favorable light on active learning, most notably, the work of Jean Piaget. Piaget's findings indicate that the majority of elementary school children are passing through what he terms the stage of concrete operations—that is, the developmental stage in which children learn through the real problems arising from the use of concrete materials. Piaget's active approach to learning provides opportunities not only for individual work but also for work in groups. In Piaget's own words, "Experience is always necessary for intellectual development. . . the subject must be active, must transform things, and find the structure of his own actions on objects. When I say 'active,' I mean it in two senses. One is acting on material things, but the other means doing things in social collaboration, in a group effort. This leads to a critical frame of mind, where children must communicate with each other. This is an essential factor in intellectual development" (In Labinowicz 1980, p. 209).

Although few educators are unaware of Piaget's work, many incorrectly assume that active learning is important only in the education of young children. There is a growing body of research focusing on secondary and postsecondary students as active learners rather than merely as passive receivers of knowledge. In a recent study (Poppenhagen 1981), in which two learning designs of a field-based graduate course were studied, findings revealed that efforts to apply experiential/active learning concepts to course design resulted in measurable differences in perceived quality of learning. A similar study, "Field-Dependence/Independence and Active Learning of Verbal and Geometric Material" (Reardon 1982), suggests that field dependent individuals (those people who tend to be influenced more than others by the context in which a perceptual judgment has to be made) generally performed better on learning and memory tasks when using more active approaches to learning.

What is the status of active learning in today's social studies classrooms?

In spite of the fact that researchers are continually illuminating aspects of active learning that may be helpful to teachers, research also continues to produce evidence that teaching in general is not yet attuned to their findings. A recently completed research synthesis, Project SPAN (Social Studies Priorities, Practices, and Needs), identified problems for social studies in the 1980s. The report criticized the traditional focus on facts and broad conclusions from history and other social science disciplines rather than on critical thinking skills, values and attitudes, social science concepts, and social participation. The report also concluded that teaching modes in most classrooms rarely, if ever, include inquiry, discovery, values education, experiential and community-based learning, simulations, programmed instruction, or contracts. Moreover, most instruction in the social studies occurs in large groups with little use of small group or individual approaches. Evaluation procedures are predominantly essay tests, assessment of participation in class discussions, and grading of student papers. Generally avoided in evaluation are synthesis and evaluation, reasoning skills, and critical and creative thinking (*The Future of Social Studies* 1982).

Similarly, in his eight-year study on schooling, John Goodlad also noted "a preponderance of classroom activity including listening, reading textbooks, completing workbooks and worksheets, and taking quizzes—with a paucity of activities requiring problem solving, the achievement of group goals, student's planning and executing a project, and the like" (1983, p. 213). In addition to Goodlad's study, a recent research effort by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) reports that not only do elementary school students like social studies less than any other subject, but also that their favorite subject is more interesting than social studies because it provides for more opportunities for activities and for a greater variety of activities (Shug 1984).

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What specific areas of the social studies currently emphasize active learning practices?

Despite these overall trends indicating heavy reliance on textbooks, lack of variety in instructional practices, and inattention to the implications of research, certain areas of the social studies such as law-related education (LRE) appear to be making gains toward the implementation of active learning instructional practices. As law-related education continues to develop momentum, the mock trial has emerged as a unique contribution to active teaching strategies. By combining aspects of roleplaying and simulation, students assume the roles of characters in a case, set up a mock courtroom, and conduct a simplified trial. Other active learning methods employed in LRE programs include case study analyses, opinion polls, surveys, and learning stations (Smith 1983).

Community-based education, another form of active learning involving participation of students in the community, has also commanded recent attention in the teaching of citizenship education. The 1984 NCSS Bulletin (72), *Citizenship and the Critical Role of the Social Studies*, presents a wide variety of action-oriented community-based approaches to teaching citizenship, including (1) social-political action projects, such as students becoming involved in political campaigns, attending caucuses, joining party and candidate organizations, working with legislators, and producing media documentaries of local problems; (2) community projects, including student work in health clinics and on youth hotlines, helping a local facility such as a senior center cut fuel consumption, operating a community recycling center, producing and distributing a community newspaper, or decorating or repainting low income housing; (3) student volunteer service, such as volunteering in social services agencies like the Red Cross, day care centers, and hospitals; (4) community study, in which students survey community attitudes about real issues, study community institutions, conduct foxfire-type oral history studies, and interview older citizens; and (5) internships, in which a few hours per week are spent with mayors, prosecutors, judges, lawyers, artists, business people, welfare workers, and other community resource people (Parker and Jarolimek 1984). These are just a few examples of active learning approaches. While such methods admittedly require a lot of initial planning, teachers as well as students benefit from increased knowledge and motivation gained from active learning. In addition, teachers concerned about the additional classroom time needed for active experiences can find reassurance in Piaget's words: "If you spend one year studying something verbally that requires two years of active study, then you have actually lost a year. If we were willing to lose a bit more time and let the children be active, let them use trial and error on different things, then the time we seem to have lost, we may have actually gained. Children may develop a general method that they can use on other subjects" (In Labinowicz 1980, p. 233).

What are some specific recommendations for incorporating active learning into the social studies?

The following recommendations summarize suggestions on contributions that educators can make toward widening the range of active learning instructional approaches. Social studies educators can (1) assess their own instructional strengths and weaknesses and make commitments to improve on at least one new instructional technique each year, directing attention to using new discussion strategies, community-based activities, surveys, and case studies; (2) provide students with at least one special, long-term learning experience each year that relates to important concepts, skills valuing, or participation objectives—activities could include social action projects, simulation gaming, peer learning and cross-age teaching programs, and individual or group research projects; (3) focus on skills involving active acquiring of information, organizing and using information, and increasing interpersonal relationships and social participation rather than skills requiring predominantly memorization and factual recall; (4) provide for individual differences and "slow learners" by developing an atmosphere of acceptance, providing for a wide variety of reading abilities, providing a wide variety of activities and approaches, using carefully planned questions, and gearing evaluation to individual abilities; (5) take advantage of programs that by their nature invite the use of active learning, such as law-related education, values education, local history, community studies, multicultural studies, and global studies; (6) obtain community support by utilizing community resource people, educating parents about important research on active learning, and participating in inservice programs designed to assist teachers in active methods; and (7) demonstrate patience with students' initial exposure to active learning methods. Students unused to such methods are likely to feel hesitant and possibly threatened by the prospect of learning on their own (Morrissett 1982, pp. 107-108). Teachers introducing active learning methods into a classroom for the first time will need to provide a lot of support and encouragement, extended periods of time for exploration, tasks of manageable complexity, and time for students to verify that their answers will be accepted.

What resources on active learning are available through the ERIC system?

Numerous documents describing active learning and active approaches to teaching social studies are included in the ERIC database. In the following list, we have noted some relevant documents in ERIC; they are identified by an ED number. ERIC documents are available for viewing in microfiche at libraries that subscribe to the ERIC Collection. Microfiche copies of documents can also be purchased from ERIC Document Reproduction Service (Box 190, Arlington, VA 22210). Paper copies can also be purchased from EDRS; some are available from the original publisher. Check *Resources in Education* (RIE) for ordering information.

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